

## Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 MC-02 ACDA-05 OMB-01 AID-05 IGA-02 EB-07

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L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06

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R 272250Z FEB 76

FM AMEMBASSY PANAMA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6891

INFO PANCANAL

USCINCSO

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 PANAMA 1461

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: MARR PN

SUBJ: REGIONAL STUDY ON CONVENTIONAL ARMS SUPPLY RESTRAINTS - PANAMA

REF: A STATE 15423, B PANAMA 1296

SUMMARY: PANAMA IS A PECULIAR EXCEPTION TO THE GENERAL PRINCIPLE THAT CONVENTIONAL ARMS RESTRAINTS ARE A DESIRABLE POLICY OBJECTIVE FOR THE US AT THIS TIME. IN ORDER TO FULFILL ITS ROLE OF TURE PARTICIPATION IN DEFENSE OF THE PANAMA CANAL, PANAMA REQUIRES AND CURRENTLY PLANS A CONSIDERABLE EXPANSION OF ITS CONVENTIONAL ARMS CAPABILITY, THE EMBASSY CONSIDERS THAT IT IS IN THE US NATIONAL INTEREST THAT WE ASSIST TO THE MAXIMUM EXTENT POSSIBLE IN REALIZING THESE PLANS. END SUMMARY.

1. BACKGROUND: US PRESENCE IN PANAMA HAS IMPEDED DEVELOPMENT OF PANAMA'S CAPABILITIES TO DATE. THE REPUBLIC ABOLISHED ITS "ARMY" IN ITS EARLY YEARS (WITH US ENCOURAGEMENT), AND MAINTAINED ONLY A MODEST NATIONAL POLICE FORCE. THIS HAS, OVER TIME, MEAMORPHOSED INTO THE NATIONAL GUARD(GN) OF TODAY, STILL PANAMA'S ONLY MILITARY FORCE, AND STILL LARGELY A POLICE

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AND RURAL CONSTABULARY ORGANIZATION. ITS ORGANIZED MILITARY CAPA-

BILITIES ARE LIMITED TO A FEW HUNDRED MEN EACH IN A NAVAL ARM WITHOUT COMBATANT VESSELS AND AN AIR FORCE WITHOUT COMBAT PLANES, AND ABOUT SIX COMPANIES OF INFANTRY WHOSE HEAVIEST WEAPON IS A 60 MM MORTAR. TO SOME EXTENT, REQUIREMENT FOR A NATIONAL DEFENSE CAPABILITY WAS OBIATED UNTIL 1939 BY PANAMA'S POSSESSION OF A BILATERAL GUARANTEE FROM US (ARTICLE I OF 1903 ISTHMIAN CANAL CONVENTION) OF INDEPENDENCE AND TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY, AND THEREAFTER BY EXTENSIVE US DEFENSE PRESENCE AND COMMITMENT TO DEFEND CANAL.

2. ATTITUDE TOWARD US MILITARY PRESENCE: US PRESENCE IN CANAL ZONE TODAY INCLUDES A UNIFORMED US MILITARY FORCE WHICH OUTNUMBERS THE GN. PANAMANIAN RESENTMENT OF THIS OVERWHELMING PRESENCE HAS BECOME A CONSIDERABLE AND PERVASIVE FACTOR IN LOCAL POLITICS. DESPITE BENEFITS IN TERMS OF EXTERNAL SECURITY AND EMPLOYMENT OF PANAMANIAN NATIONALS, PANAMA HAS CONSISTENTLY ARGUED THAT THIS EXTENSIVE US MILITARY COMPLEX HAS NO LEGAL BASIS IN 1903 TREATY, AND THAT IT IS PRIMARILY DIRECTED AT PANAMA. WHILE POSITION THAT US MILITARY MUST GO TOTALLY FROM CANAL ZONE IS STILL LIMITED TO A RELATIVELY SMALL (BUT VOCAL) EXTREMIST FRINGE, MOST RESPONSIBLE PANAMANIAN TEMPER THEIR ACCEPTANCE IN PRINCIPLE OF SOME US MILITARY PRESENCE WITH A STRONG DESIRE TO LIMIT THIS PRESENCE, TO CONTROL ITS OTUWARD MANIFESTATIONS, AND TO ENSURE THAT IT IS DIRECTED AFAINST OTHER POTENTIAL ENEMIES OF BOTH US AND PANAMA WHO MIGHT THREATEN CANAL.

3. TREATY NEGOTIATIONS: THUS, PANAMA ATTACHES CONSIDERABLE IMPORTANCE TO PROVISION IN KISSINGER-TACK DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES OF FEB 1974 WHICH STATED THAT UNDER A NEW CANAL TREATY PANAMA WOULD PARTICIPATE WITH US IN DEFENSE OF CANAL. PANAMA IS AWARE THAT IMPLEMENTATION OF THIS PRINCIPLE UNDER A NEW TREATY MUST DEPEND TO SOME EXTENT ON CAPABILITIES OF GN. GN ITSELF IS ACUTELY AWARE THAT IT DOES NOT NOW HAVE ANYTHING LIKE THE MILITARY CAPABILITY WHICH WOULD ENABLE IT TO PLAY A CREDIBLE ROLE IN ANY JOINT DEFENSE OF THE CANAL, BUT IT FULLY INTENDS TO ACQUIRE SUCH A APABILITY AS RAPIDLY AS POSSIBLE.

4. GN FORCE DEVELOPMENT PLANS: GN IS NOW PLANNING FOR ACTIVATION OF THE FIRST OF FOUR PROJECTED MANEUVER  
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BATTALIONS NOT LATER THAN THE TIME WHEN A NEW CANAL TREATY WOULD COME INTO FORCE, WITH OTHERS FOLLOWING OVER A DECADE OR SO (REF B). IN ORDER TO EQUIP THIS FORCE, GN WILL REQUIRE A CONSIDERABLE EXPANSION, BOTH QUANTITATIVELY AND QUALITATIVELY, IN CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS AND EQUIPMENT FOR GROUND ELEMENTS AND IN SUPPORTING NAVAL AND AIR CAPABILITIES TO PROVIDE FOR BALANCED FORCE DEVELOPMENT. IT IS US POLICY TO SEEK TO REMAIN PRINCIPAL, OR SOLE, SUPPLIER OF EQUIPMENT TO REALIZE THESE

PLANS; REF B EXPLORES THIS POLICY IN MORE DETAIL.

5. US INTERESTS: OUR BASIC INTEREST ON THE ISTHMUS IS THAT PANAMA CANAL BE MAINTAINED AS A SAFE, OPEN, EFFICIENTLY OPERATED AND NEUTRAL WATERWAY. THIS PRESUPPOSES A US INTEREST IN ITS ADEQUATE DEFENSE FROM POTENTIAL THREATS. PANAMA IS FAR MORE DEPENDENT ON THE CANAL THAN THE US, AND THUS SHARES A SIMILAR INTEREST IN ADEQUATE DEFENSE OF THE CANAL. FOR 70 YEARS, THE US HAS DEFENDED THE CANAL (AND PANAMA) VIRTUALLY UNILATERALLY. THIS IS NO LONGER POLITICALLY FEASIBLE VIS-A-VIS PANAMA. GIVEN GROWING FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS ON OUR OVERSEAS DEFENSE PRESENCE WORLDWIDE, IT IS ALSO POSSIBLE THAT AT SOME POINT IN THE FUTURE SUCH ESSENTIALLY UNILATERAL DEFENSE OF THE CANAL MIGHT NO LONGER BE FINANCIALLY PRACTICABLE FOR THE US. THUS, IT IS IN OUR INTEREST THAT THE GN BE ABLE TO PARTICIPATE CREDIBLY IN THE DEFENSE OF THE CANAL, AND--AN IMPORTANT COROLLARY FROM OUR POINT OF VIEW--THAT OUR CONDUCT TOWARD AND RELATIONS WITH THE GN BE SUCH AS TO INSURE TO THE MAXIMUM FEASIBLE EXTENT THAT SUCH GN PARTICIPATION WOULD NOT AT SOME POINT, RUN COUNTER TO OUR INTERESTS IN THE CANAL. OUR POLICY OF FAVORING CONVENTIONAL ARMS LIMITATIONS OR RESTRAINTS ON A REGIONAL OR SUBREGIONAL BASIS IN LATIN AMERICA MUST THEREFORE BE BALANCED AGAINST OUR PARTICULAR INTERESTS IN FOSTERING, AND ACTIVELY PARTICIPATING IN, THIS EXPANSION OF THE CONVENTIONAL CAPABILITIES OF THE PANAMANIAN NATIONAL GUARD.

6. WITH THE FOREGOING CONSIDERATIONS IN MIND, THE FOLLOWING ARE THE EMBASSY'S DETAILED RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONS POSED REF A. THE POINTS BELOW ARE KEYED TO PARTICULAR QUESTIONS NUMBERED IN PARA 2 OF THAT CABLE.

(1) FACTORS FAVORING REGIONAL CONVENTIONAL ARMS RESTRAINT:

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TO A LARGE EXTENT, AND ASSUMING THAT CUBA AND THE MILITARY THREAT FROM IT IS CONSIDERED A MANIFESTATION OF A GLOBAL PROBLEM RATHER THAN A STRICTLY REGIONAL ONE, PANAMA'S EXPANSION IS NOT PARTICULARLY DIRECTED AGAINST ANY OF ITS REGIONAL NEIGHBORS. PANAMA HAS NO OUTSTANDING BORDER DISPUTES WITH EITHER OF ITS LAND NEIGHBORS, COLOMBIA AND COSTA RICA, AND EMBASSY SEES LITTLE LIKELIHOOD THAT MILITARY CONFRONTATION WITH EITHER WOULD OCCUR IN THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE. ON THE OTHER HAND, PANAMA CANNOT FORGET THAT IT WAS ONCE A PROVINCE OF COLOMBIA WHICH BROKE AWAY AGAINST ARMED FORCE (COUNTERED AT THAT TIME BY US ASSISTANCE); THUS, PANAMA COULD REASONABLY BE EXPECTED TO FAVOR ANY REGIONAL OR SUBREGIONAL CONVENTIONAL ARMS RESTRAINT SCHEME WHICH WOULD HAVE THE EFFECT OF RESTRICTING COLOMBIA'S CAPABILITIES TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT ITS FORMER PROVINCE, SHOULD THE INCLINATION STRIKE IT

AT SOME LATER DATE. GIVEN OTHER FACTORS OUTLINED IN THIS CABLE, HOWEVER, WE WOULD NOT EXPECT PANAMA TO TAKE A LEADING ROLE IN DEVISING SUCH A SCHEME, NOR TO BE PARTICULARLY ENERGETIC IN PURSUIT OF IT.

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INFO PANCANAL

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 PANAMA 1461

(2) OBSTACLES TO REGIONAL ARMS RESTRAINT: AS NOTED ABOVE, PANAMA WOULD BE WILLING TO CONSIDER ANY ARRANGEMENTS FOR THIS PURPOSE ONLY SUBJECT TO THE IMPORTANT CAVEAT THAT THEY NOT APPLY TO RESTRICT DEVELOPMENT OF PANAMANIAN MILITARY CAPABILITIES RELATING TO CANAL AND NATIONAL DEFENSE AFTER THEIR YEARS OF ATROPHY. THIS AMOUNTS TO A BLANKET EXCEPTION FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE WHICH WOULD PROBABLY NOT BE TOO WELCOME TO THEIR REGIONAL OR SUBREGIONAL STATES AND WOULD PROBABLY WORK AGAINST SUCCESS IN AGREEMENT ON ANY SUCH ARRANGEMENT APPLYING TO A GROUP OF STATES INCLUDING PANAMA.

(3) SUBREGIONAL APPROACHES: WHILE PANAMA IS A FREQUENT SIXTH PARTICIPANT IN ARRANGEMENTS INVOLVING THE CENTRAL AMERICAN FIVE, WE DOUBT THAT PANAMA WOULD WISH TO COOPERATE IN ANY SUCH SUBREGIONAL APPROACH UNLESS IT INCLUDED BOTH OF PANAMA'S NEIGHBORS, I.E., COLOMBIA AND COSTA RICA. THIS WOULD HAVE TO BE ADDED TO PANAMA'S RELUCTANCE TO CONSIDER PARTICIPATING HERSELF IN ANY SUCH ARRANGEMENT AT ALL.

(4) LA SENSITIVITY TO A US LEAD: PANAMA'S SENSITIVITY IN THIS RESPECT IS GREAT, IF NOT DOMINANT IN HER POLICY MAKING. RE PARA 4(A) REF A, DUE TO HER PECULIAR HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP  
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WITH US. PANAMA WOULD NOT AT THIS STAGE VIEW A US BILATERAL GUARANTEE AS AN INCENTIVE TO ARMS RESTRAINT. FURTHER, ANYTHING WHICH SMACKED OF A US POLICY WHICH WOULD WORK AGAINST PANAMA'S ACQUIRING HER FULL ATTAINABLE CAPABILITY FOR FULL PARTICIPATION IN A JOINT DEFENSE OF THE CANAL (LOOKING TOWARD THE DAY WHEN PANAMA WOULD ASSUME A SIGNIFICANT RESPONSIBILITY FOR CANAL DEFENSE) WOULD BE TAKEN IN PANAMA AS ADDING A "CATCH 22" TO OUR ARGUMENT THAT THE TEXT OF US MILITARY PRESENCE FOR CANAL DEFENSE IS TO SOME EXTENT RELATED TO THE CAPABILITIES OF THE GN. WE EXPECT PANAMA WOULD REACT WITH SOMETHING AKIN TO FURY SHOULD WE ADOPT THIS AS AN OVERT POLICY APPLYING TO PANAMA AT ANY TIME WHILE CANAL DEFENSE IS ABOUT TO BECOME, OR IS, A JOINT MATTER. ALSO, SINCE MOST OF PANAMA'S EXPANSION PLANS ENVISION CASH, FMS CREDIT OR COMMERCIAL CREDIT PURCHASES, SUCH A POLICY WOULD JUST DRIVE PANAMA TO SEEK OTHER SOURCES OF ARMS SUPPLY TO IMPLEMENT ITS MILITARY FORCE DEVELOPMENT PLANS, A REACTION WHICH IT IS US POLICY TO AVOID.

(5) MOST FEASIBLE RESTRAINT ARRANGEMENTS: BOTH NONACQUISITION AND DISARMAMENT, IF THEY APPLIED TO PANAMA AS WELL AS TO OTHER STATES IN THE REGION, ARE OBVIOUS NON-STARTERS WHEN THE COUNTRY'S PLANS CALL FOR MAJOR ACQUISITION AND ARMAMENT FROM WHAT AMOUNTS TO A PRACTICALLY ZERO BASE. CEILINGS MIGHT RECEIVE A HEARING, BUT OTHER PARTICIPATING STATES WOULD HAVE TO ACQUIESCE IN SETTING SUCH CEILINGS HIGH ENOUGH TO ACCOMMODATE BOTH PRESENT AND ANY POSSIBLE FUTURE EXPANSION PLANS FOR WHICH PANAMA MAY PERCEIVE A NEED. THIS WOULD REQUIRE SUCH SPECIAL TREATMENT AS TO OBTAIN ANY REAL CHANCE OF MEANINGFUL AGREEMENT ON SUCH CEILINGS BY OTHER PARTICIPATING STATES. RE PARA 4(B) REF A, LOCAL PRODUCTION OF ARMS IS NOT A FEASIBLE PROPOSITION FOR A COUNTRY THE SIZE OF PANAMA AND IS NOT LIKELY TO BECOME ONE IN THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE. FOR PANAMA, THE OPTIONS ARE PURCHASE FROM THE US OR PURCHASE FROM ANOTHER SOURCE; AS NOTED ABOVE, OUR POLICY DICTATES THAT WE WOULD ESIRE PURCHASE FROM THE US. ONE ARRANGEMENT WHICH EMBASSY CAN ENVISION AS POSSIBLY ACCEPTABLE TO PANAMA AND TO OTHER STATES IN IMMEDIATE AREA (ALBEIT NOT TO THE LARGER STATES IN LATIN AMERICA) MIGHT BE AN AGREEMENT TO REFRAIN FROM ACQUIRING CAPABILITIES CERTAIN HIGH-TECHNOLOGY WEAPONS SYSTEMS SUCH AS SOPHISTICATED AIR DEFENSE OR ANTI-SUBMARINE WARFARE, IN EXCHANGE FOR JOINT PLANNING WITH US AND US COMMITMENT TO PROVIDE FOR ANY SUCH REQUIREMENTS IN PARTICI-  
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PATING COUNTRIES SHOULD OCCASION REQUIRE AND PARTICIPATING COUNTRIES SO REQUEST. REALISTICALLY, COSTS AND TECHNOLOGICAL BASE TO SUPPORT SUCH CAPABILITY WOULD BE RUINOUS TO PANAMA AND OTHER CENTRAL AMERICAN STATES, AND WOULD PROBABLY BE UNACCEPTABLY HIGH EVEN FOR COLOMBIA, WHOSE PARTICIPATION WOULD PROBABLY BE REQUIRED FOR PANAMA TO PARTICIPATE. SUCH JOINT PLANNING AGREEMENT WITH US WOULD BOTH PROMOTE RESTRAINT IN AGREED HIGH-TECHNOLOGY WEAPONS SYSTEMS, AND WOULD FACILITATE OUR DOING WHAT WE WOULD PROBABLY HAVE TO DO IN ANY EVENT SHOULD A FUTURE MILITARY CONTINGENCY REQUIRE US TO PROTECT CARIBBEAN SEA LANES AND REPARIAN AREAS, BUT SHOULD ENTAIL NO IMMEDIATE EXPENSE TO USG AND NO ADDITIONAL DEFENSE COMMITMENTS BEYOND THOSE ALREADY EMBODIED IN RIO TREATY. TO BE POLITICALLY ACCEPTABLE, AT LEAST IN PANAMA, INITIATIVE FOR SUCH A TECHNOLOGICAL RESTRAINT AGREEMENT COULD NOT COME FROM USG; IN OUR VIEW, MOST PRACTICAL WAY OF BROACHING SUBJECT MIGHT BE DISCUSSIONS BY USSOUTHCOM, LOCAL MILGROUPS AND/OR HIGHER-LEVEL USG MILITARY WITH MILITARY COUNTERPARTS IN COUNTRIES WHICH MIGHT PARTICIPATE IN SUCH AN AGREEMENT, WITH SUGGESTION THAT THIS WAS INFORMAL MILITARY-MILITARY IDEA WHICH THEIR GOVERNMENTS MIGHT EXPLORE TOGETHER AND WITH USG THROUGH FORMAL DIPLOMATIC CHANNELS IF THEY FOUND IT FEASIBLE AND DESIRABLE.

8. FINALLY, SHOULD CONGRESSIONAL ACTION PREEMPT THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH ON THIS ISSUE, THE ONLY SUGGESTION WHICH THE EMBASSY CAN OFFER IS THAT THE EXECUTIVE SHOULD, AS A MATTER OF URGENT PRIORITY, SEEK A SPECIFIC EXCEPTION FROM ANY SUCH CONGRESSIONAL ACTION AS IT APPLIED TO PANAMA. SUCH AN EXCEPTION MIGHT BE TIED TO LEGISLATION REFERRING SOLELY TO PANAMANIAN PLANS WHICH THE US CONSIDERS TO BE IN ACCORD WITH ITS ROLE IN FUTURE JOINT DEFENSE OF THE CANAL. THIS WOULD BE OUR POLICY IN ANY EVENT. HOWEVER, SUCH A CONDITION EMBODIED IN A US LEGISLATION WOULD HAVE SO MUCH FLAVOR OF THE GREATLY RESENTED AMERICAN TUTELAGE OF PAST YEARS THAT IT MIGHT TURN OUT TO BE ALMOST AS COUNTERPRODUCTIVE AS AN OUTRIGHT LIMITATION ON SECURITY ASSISTANCE TO PANAMA.

9. IN SUMMARY, THE GREATEST SINGLE INDUCEMENT THAT WE CAN SEE TO OFFER TO PANAMA FOR ITS ULTIMATE PARTICIPATION IN ANY REGIONAL CONVENTIONAL ARMS LIMITATION SCHEME IS THE SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF THE TREATY NEGOTIATIONS, THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CLOSE AND HARMONIOUS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN US AND PANAMANIAN  
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MILITARY FOR CANAL DEFENSE UNDER THE NEW TREATY, AND CONSISTENT USSUPPORT FOR PANAMA'S DEVELOPMENT OF A MILITARY CAPABILITY WHICH WOULD MAKE ITS FUTURE ACCEPTANCE OF REGIONAL CONVENTIONAL ARMS RESTRAINSTS A RATIONAL ACT ON THE PART OF ITS GOVERNMENT,

AND ONE WHICH WOULD ALSO ACCORD WITH OVERALL US INTERESTS IN  
THE PANAMA CANAL.  
JORDEN

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